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Failure of Intelligence

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The failure of the Central Intelligence Agency to predict the upheaval in Iran prompted the President to send handwritten notes of complaint to national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner and Secretary of State Vance. The agencies headed by each proceeded to demonstrate that, however limited their view of the world, they were unerring analysts of one another's mistakes. The C.I.A.'s explanation for reporting that all was for the best in the Shah's best of all possible worlds was that it had been ordered by the White House and the State Department to talk only to the Savak. The State Department grumbled that the White House had rejected its warnings about growing political unrest in Iran. Dr. Brzezinski, apparently recalling that December is term-paper time, gave the State Department's research failing marks. Then, to close the circle, the President himself was held by *The New York Times* to be not entirely blameless on the ground that he had seen in Iran only what he wanted to see.

The President, at least, should console himself; the failure of our national security apparatus to provide Presidents with adequate intelligence is hardly new. I recollect a chat in John Kennedy's White House with a distinguished member of that Administration. It was in July of 1961, and he produced that day's *Washington Post*, with a headlined report by the late Isaac Deutscher on an alleged conflict between China and the Soviet Union. Was Deutscher, he asked, to be taken seriously? Deutscher, I replied, was a Marxist working alone in Hampstead, London,—and occasionally talking to East Europeans. You, I continued, have the C.I.A., the Pentagon, the State Department, electronic eavesdropping and much, much more. Precisely, was the reply, that is why I need Deutscher.

The "intelligence" failure in Iran is, of course, a failure of policy. A decision having been made to back the Shah, the very attempt to establish alternative sources of information became an implicit disavowal of him. In a world in which appearances ("signals" is the customary word, with its original denotation of a very primitive mode of communication) are everything, ignoring questions of substance is not an oversight: it is an imperative. Dr. Brzezinski is said to have argued that the question of human rights was

important, but secondary to the necessity of maintaining a friendly Iranian Government in a very strategic country. He did so despite the growing evidence that his adherence to a supposedly pragmatic position required a very large leap of faith. The purchase of friendship from an Iranian Government opposed by the nation assured the primacy of the issue of human rights in Iran. With friends like the Shah, his generals and policemen, we clearly do not need enemies.

Familiar themes, which hardly bear repeating—but for a terrible suspicion. Suppose our elites actually take the anti-world of appearances, messages, signals, and international gamesmanship for the real one? Elites, after all, suffer alternately from two severe disorders. One is their conviction of omnipotence. The other is their panicked sense of helplessness. Bureaucrats long for a predictable world in which even (or above all) enemies stick to their (the bureaucrats') scripts. The world's stubborn refusal to conform to position papers is a constant disappointment—and, worse, a source of endless anxiety. Fantasies of total order ward off fears of complete catastrophe but, since order inevitably breaks down, also generate them. Bureaucratic inventiveness is, however, limitless—when the problem is staying on top. The doctrine of "crisis management" was invented to circumvent these difficulties. It offers surcease from the dreadful cycle to which reality condemns those who would rule. It obviates the necessity for that vision of history, or knowledge of history, which contemporary elites so conspicuously lack. The doctrine is fraudulent. Like the legendary generals fighting the last war, most elites manage new crises with techniques learned in old ones. Most crises, in any event, will not respond to technique alone.

It is unfair to depict our elites as entirely devoid of thought. They possess a philosophy of history, in the form of the doctrine of "modernization," most recently applied to Iran. The Shah, we are assured, was "modernizing" Iran. The notion of "modernization" was developed by academic social scientists anxious to explain and justify our postwar empire. The world was bound to become like the United States, if not more so. Nations once backward would attain that secular utopia, a society of consumer-citizens. Indeed, in truly modern nations citizens would consume more, and think less. Politics would be the reserved domain of technocratic elites, subject to occasional approbation by grateful publics—whose maturity could be measured by the intensity of their gratitude.

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